

*O Almighty God, who pourest out on all who desire it the spirit of grace and of supplication: Deliver us, when we draw near to thee, from coldness of heart and wanderings of mind, that with steadfast thoughts and kindled affections we may worship thee in spirit and in truth;  
In the name of God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.*

Good morning! Good morning at home!

Last week, we began working through St. James letter, which we'll continue to read for our second lesson over the next few weeks. And before we think again about what we've heard from the second chapter of his letter, I thought it might be helpful to remember a few things about how we can get the most out of this challenging text. One, it's helpful to remember that James was a careful student of Jesus' teaching. So much of what we learn from the rest of the New Testament, from the story of Jesus as told by the evangelists, to many of the implications as written to the earliest church communities in the Apostolic letters is implied or understood as important background to James' work. Second, as readers we are meant to be seeking after the wisdom of godliness, the wisdom of obedience to Christ's "royal law." Again, to know Jesus' "royal law" is to know more about Jesus' teaching about who he is as the Messiah, and to know more about how when people live as if he *is* the Messiah, their hearts and minds become oriented around the strange rules of his Kingdom. Finally, we ought to be mindful that although James' letter is

forceful in its encouragement, we ought not to work through it as a checklist for behavior; for we are as always awaiting God's grace to enlighten our minds and motivate our wills towards the moral vision laid out for us. Being careful in this way will guard against the self-righteousness that benighted Jesus' opponents and tempts even his most devoted disciples to this day.

And today's lesson from the second chapter of the letter carries a punch, which certainly has a way of landing among those of us in the settled and affluent west. The contrast between the poor and the rich is a going concern for St. James, which is also true of his brother, Jesus. And Jesus, as a Bible teacher, knew the long tradition of the Hebrew prophets who consistently lambasted Israel for their lack of regard for the poor among them. In fact, the prophets pretty consistently indict the ancient Israelites on two counts, two counts that reflected Israel's fidelity to the God that redeemed and covenanted with them. They had fallen to idolatry which reflected their lack of affection for God. They had not taken care of the poor which reflected their lack of regard for the dignity of fellow human beings as potential image bearers of God.

And in Jesus' time, as in most of recorded history, that contrast between poor and rich was a stark one indeed. Again, Jesus would often tell parables or give sermons that would show his followers about how social status was not a marker of true worth in the new value system of

his kingdom, and many of his parables and sermons were pretty familiar allusions and reconfigurations of Biblical texts and themes. Today's lesson about partiality, hospitality, and welcome reminds me of one of Jesus' more vivid teachings from Luke 14, where he chides his opponents at a dinner party as they bicker and vie for seats and placements that befit their station, showing off an intricate web of ancient and deeply embedded cultural indicators of patronage and wealth. But Jesus, seizing on a banquet as a great image for the Kingdom of God, encouraged a host to invite any comers, especially the poor and hurting, because they could not show off any of those cultural indicators. That kind of hospitality, where favoritism and clout were no longer the mark of the banquet, but rather the radical invitation to come and eat and sit at Christ's feet as the host of hosts, that kind of hospitality was and is a vital aspect of how people of the Kingdom would act.

And so, we see that idea plainly at work in James' text this morning, especially the first section. In the communities that James set out to encourage in his letter, there were rich people in the churches, and there were poor people in the churches, just like today anywhere in the world. And James wanted to make sure, just like his colleague Paul, that everyone that came to sit at the feet of Jesus had a place; that the desire to be Christ's disciple and grow in godliness and wisdom was of greater importance in the Kingdom of God than any other measure of stature. Or to summarize as he did, the royal law: to love one's neighbor, takes

precedence. Heart and hand working together to love one's neighbor is a strong indicator of one's fidelity to Christ, his word, and his work.

I suspect that at least a few people in the room will feel a pang of conscience in hearing this text. I always do. This chapter hit me like a ton of bricks when I first started thinking and praying through it. This text, and others like it led me to what I thought would be a longer career as a case manager working with homeless youth. This hands-on work with the poor, was my attempt at addressing James' final word in today's lesson, those pointed and powerful questions that seared my conscience: What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works?

I wanted my faith to be visible, to be tangible, to be found working and not just believing. I wanted to be a doer and not just a hearer, like we heard last week. But sadly, as my case load increased, so did my self-righteous indignation, and what started as a desire for an active faith became kind of a broken- and upside-down status symbol of its own, one that ceased to be a source of Kingdom hospitality and more a source of pride and hubris.

I bring up that embarrassment as a warning against the temptation for the quick fix of conscience that can so often come along with hearing a strong admonishment to serve the poor. Beloved, to have a heart open

for hospitality and humble service is a great thing, a truly perfect gift from our Father of lights. But it is a gift that truly comes via grace, comes by our open hearts to Jesus, and our desire to be more like him, to be wise like he is, and to love people like he does. As usual, the psalmist gets it right when he wrote:

The Lord loves the righteous;  
the Lord cares for the stranger; \*  
he sustains the orphan and widow,  
but frustrates the way of the wicked.

We do our best for the poor, for everyone really, when we recognize that our work is an extension of what God is already doing. Thus, I pray that whatever work we do to increase our hospitality for one another, eschewing favoritism and favoring affection and godly welcome, we would do so with minds and hearts set on Christ and his royal law.

I am grateful, as your brother, friend, priest, and pastor, to see how well this congregation is on the way. One of my delights on any given Sunday is to see folks enjoy the company of their friends and families, but also making sure to welcome guests, brothers, and sisters from other parts of the common room, perhaps even other life experiences. I pray that our community here at St. John's would always be known for the speed of her welcome, and the depth of her hospitality, here and across this great city.

Thus, would the joy of our godly wisdom and faithfulness be known, and thus will Christ be magnified in our love for him, his commands, and his people.

To God be all glory. Amen.